

In a radio interview last week, I boasted that one of the hallmarks of America is the peaceful transition of power, and our ability to resolve political battles with words rather than weapons. In Arizona this past Saturday, words failed as my colleague Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, members of her staff, a federal district court judge, and other innocent bystanders were viciously attacked by a 22-year old gunman.

Thus far, six are confirmed dead, and at least 13 others wounded. Six remain hospitalized including Congresswoman Giffords, who is in critical condition. The murderer is in custody.

I wanted to write to you this week about the promise of the new historic 112th Congress, and laud the peaceful changeover, but this act of senseless political violence blemishes that meaning.

The tragedy is all the more poignant and painfully fresh as I and other Nebraskans are still struggling to make sense of the shocking shootings at Millard South High School in Omaha.

Elsewhere around the world, religious minorities in Nigeria, Egypt, and Iraq are struggling to cope in the aftermath of wanton Christmastime attacks. Hundreds are dead following a wave of post-election violence in the Ivory Coast, where a deposed leader will not give up his seat to the rightfully elected victor. As I write, politically-motivated attacks are under way in Sudan as people are voting in a weeklong referendum for their future.

Our world is complex, and we have unfortunately grown accustomed to such violence and instability in other areas of the world. But events such as what occurred Saturday at an open constituent forum in Tucson, Arizona, or Wednesday at Millard South High School, show how delicate and precarious our social orderliness may be.

This would have been the first full week of the new 112th Congress. Legislative activity for this week has been postponed as we, along with the citizens of Arizona, try to cope with the attack on one of our own. While I do not know Congresswoman Giffords well, I was sworn into the new session of Congress with her just last week. My family, who was with me for the swearing-in, actually happened to speak with her. I feel the pain of this attack deeply.

Only about 12,000 Americans have had the honor and privilege of serving in Congress, and attempts against their lives have thankfully been rare. Much of the coverage of this contemptible assassination attempt immediately turned to the political environment. As yet, none of the media has explored the cultural undercurrents that are leading some to acts of self-destructiveness. Whatever the reason, this wasn't just a targeted attack, but an assault on ideals--our integrity and innocence, our storied way of life itself. No matter the motive, no elected official, nor any American or citizen of the world, is deserving of violence for their political beliefs. Not their politics, not their religion, not their race, nor other attributes.

I ask for your thoughts and prayers to remain with Congresswoman Giffords, her staff, the other victims and their families, and the people of Tucson affected by this tragedy. I also join my fellow elected leaders, along with the public consciousness of our nation, to ensure that differences do not become dangerous. Constructive criticism of government is a right and a hallmark of our system, but we must always elevate principled discourse with pragmatism and civility in carrying the weighty but proud mantle of our great nation.